

# High trust needed in China-ASEAN ties

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By Kishore Mahbubani



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We cannot predict the future. Yet one thing seems almost certain: China will emerge as the world's No. 1 economic power in the next decade or two.

Indeed the IMF has predicted that by 2019, China will have the world's largest economy in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms. The big question that the world is asking now is: How will China behave when it becomes No. 1?

Former US president Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, "Great power involves great responsibility." China will therefore have to take on more responsibilities when it becomes No. 1. This is inevitable.

And in the next decade or so China will be watched very carefully by the world as it emerges. The world will be looking for clues on how China will behave as No. 1. This is why China-ASEAN relations will become very important. They could provide a model of good neighborliness for the whole world to follow.

Unlike the US, which only has two neighbors, China is blessed with many neighbors. It is also not a secret that China has had difficult relations with some of them. Fortunately, China's relations with all of its neighbors have improved in recent decades.

However, while trade and economic relations have flourished, the cultural and people-to-people relations have lagged behind. Although China has relatively good relations with its neighbors, it has not yet achieved a "high-trust" relationship with them.

What is a good example of a "high-trust" relationship? Perhaps the best example is provided by the relationship between the US and Europe. They are separated by the vast Atlantic Ocean, but they are united by close cultural and people-to-people links.

This does not mean that the relationship is free of problems. There have been economic disputes between the two. Both are struggling to negotiate the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). The German Chancellor Angela Merkel was furious when she learned that the US intelligence had been bugging her personal cellphone.

Yet despite all these difficulties, the level of trust and cooperation between the US and Europe remains high and unbroken.

This is the type of "high-trust" relationship that China can aspire to build with ASEAN. Just as Europe does not threaten the US in any way, ASEAN also does not threaten China in any way.

Indeed China-ASEAN relations have grown positively in many ways in the last 30 years, since the landmark visit of former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping to Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore in November 1978. Yet there are also some continuing difficulties in the China-ASEAN relationship.

One good example of this is provided by the competing claims in the South China Sea. Fortunately, all parties agree that the disputes should be resolved peacefully. It is also good that China and ASEAN have concluded the ASEAN Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and are now working on the ASEAN Code of Conduct.

One complicating factor is the nine-dashed line that is found in Chinese maps on the South China Sea.

But the ambiguity that China has not fully clarified the meaning of this line provides scope for negotiations. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying has also explicitly stated that "freedom of navigation on the South China Sea is never a problem and will not be one in the future."

When China emerges as the preeminent economic power in the world, it will have the same interest as the US to maintain freedom of navigation on the high seas. The interests of China and the US will converge in this area, just as the US and the Soviet Union had convergent interests in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea negotiations on freedom of navigation.

It would be tragic for China to succeed in the South China Sea and lose the world's oceans. Given this larger overriding interest of China, I am confident that the relevant ASEAN countries can work together with China to find amicable long-term solutions for the South China Sea issues. This will then pave the way for China and ASEAN to work together to build a "high-trust" relationship similar to the US-Europe relationship.

*The author is Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. [opinion@globaltimes.com.cn](mailto:opinion@globaltimes.com.cn)*

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